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# Freedom deserves defending

**D**istracted by the partisan clamor of campaign rhetoric, the media last week failed to focus on the remarkable ability of the National Endowment for Democracy to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of what appeared certain defeat.

Stripped of all '85 funding by a 226-173 vote in the House last May after a brief existence, the NED's new appropriation of \$18.5 million has now been guaranteed by a startling reversal of the previous House vote. A unique cooperative lobbying effort by the AFL-CIO and its old opponent, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, helped to switch more than 70 votes, and President Reagan's strong support was critical.

In the opinion of State Department career officials, there was at stake here "the single most important genuine bipartisan initiative in U.S. foreign policy since the formation of NATO." With so much on the table in terms of future American capacity to compete effectively with the Soviet Union in the Third World, the AFL-CIO leaders made the vote a key test of the loyalty of their congressional supporters and the Chamber of Commerce did the same.

By defeating a strange alliance of hard-line conservatives and soft-line liberals, Rep. Dante Fascell, D-Fla., and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, led their troops in the vital center to a bipartisan victory. The independent board of the NED and its new president, Carl Gershman, now have a clear chance to show what they can do "to encourage free and democratic institutions throughout the world through private initiatives," as the NED's charter defines its principal purpose.

With the shadow of a congressional cutoff finally lifted, the United States has in this endowment what it has long needed — a publicly funded but independent agency that has as its first priority the task of helping such institutions

abroad as free trade unions, democratic political parties, and private-business associations.

Our democratic friends overseas can now count on a reliable and open source of American support in their unequal struggle with the heavily funded Soviet apparatus of communist parties and front groups.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, American presidents from Harry Truman to Lyndon Johnson clearly saw the danger in Moscow's manipulation of a supranational ideology and of an interlocking directorate of front organizations. They reacted by authorizing secret CIA subsidies to private American organizations willing to help their democratic counterpart groups abroad.

When this controversial secret funding was permanently ended in 1967 by a series of leaks to the press, all efforts to find a way of openly providing official American help to non-governmental organizations abroad initially proved unsuccessful. Until the formation and funding of the NED, the Soviets faced in this organizational struggle only the limited opposition that private American groups and foundations could offer. Since the scale of the Soviet investment in this field has been conservatively estimated at \$3 billion annually, the struggle was obviously an unequal one.

Now that Congress has found a way, through the NED, of openly funding beleaguered democratic forces overseas, it has been wise to proceed cautiously at first, in view of the extreme sensitivity of such intervention. For example, the Congress has cut out funds the Reagan administration requested for Republican and Democratic Party institutes that might too easily have fallen into competition and conflict with each other.

Under the terms of its charter, the NED is a grant-giving agency and cannot operate abroad except through the American private organizations that it helps. Also the Congress has earmarked the largest share of next year's appropriation for the AFL-CIO, as the one organization that has the most overseas experience and is directly involved in the most crucial sector of the East-West rivalry.

Operating with its own funds and project grants from the Agency for International Development, the U.S. labor federation has in the past built regional institutes for Latin America, Asia, and Africa and has a trained cadre of labor specialists already in place. The generous

endowment grant will give the very competent leadership of the AFL-CIO the flexibility it needs to act promptly to help democratic unions in such key crisis areas as the Philippines and Central America and in their struggle against the right-wing dictatorship in Chile.

In short, the National Endowment for Democracy is off to a good start and promises to grow steadily in its ability to give a wide variety of American voluntary organizations a major role in the expansion of democratic institutions throughout the world.

It is a tribute to the congressional leadership of both parties that so significant and controversial a step forward has been taken in the midst of the partisan bitterness of a presidential campaign.

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